



BBC tv
DOCTOR WHO

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
TELEVISION CENTRE WOOD LANE LONDON W12 7RJ

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NOTES FOR NEW WRITERS

1.

Introduction

Before you send in your 'Doctor Who' script, please consider these facts. It is almost impossible for an untried writer to sell a script to any television series. 'Doctor Who' is one of the most difficult series to write for. The sole function of the production office is not to deal with novice writers and unsolicited story material. This could easily become a full time job and of course the only real full-time job is putting 'Doctor Who' on your screens. Please understand this. Unsolicited scripts will be considered and you will get a response. But if the response is negative, accept that. Don't re-submit rejected scripts or write back asking for detailed explanations of why your work isn't suitable.

Scripts versus Storylines

In the past prospective writers have been encouraged to write brief storylines or summaries of their ideas instead of a full length script. There is no point in this. No-one will be commissioned to write for 'Doctor Who' purely on the basis of a storyline. Only writers who show themselves capable of writing a finished script of professional standard will be considered. If you submit a storyline alone you are guaranteeing that you will be rejected. A storyline is only useful if it is submitted in conjunction with a complete script for one episode. Don't send more than one script even if you have written an entire story. If your first episode shows promise, we'll certainly ask to see the rest. If you are unsure what a television script looks like, see the sample page at the end of these notes. All finished scripts are automatically passed to the BBC Script Unit for a second opinion. The purpose of the Script Unit is to encourage new writing talent. If you have non-'Doctor Who' scripts, send them to the Script Unit directly at the following address:

Head of Television Script Unit,
BBC Television Centre,
Wood Lane,
London. W12 7RJ.

Please note that the Script Unit will not read storylines or consider hand-written scripts.

Story Length

'Doctor Who' is currently running to a 14 episode season. A length of three or four episodes per story seems the most likely and natural format.

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Budgetary Considerations

You should take financial considerations into account if you want to write a workable script. A 'Doctor Who' story should involve the use of about eight to ten sets and about a quarter of the total story can be shot on location. Special effects are obviously expensive. Don't blow your entire budget on the first scene.

Daleks, etc.

Most of the story ideas we receive involve such old favourites as Daleks, the Master, Cybermen, U.N.I.T. etc. However, including these in your script just guarantees its rejection. Why? Such characters and situations fall into three categories: 1) They are the creations of certain writers who own the copyright on them. For example, Terry Nation owns the copyright on the Daleks. The creators are the only people legally entitled to write stories about these characters. 2) The characters or situations are part of 'Doctor Who's past and we have no current plans to use them again. 3) We will be using these characters again, but only very sparingly, to avoid over-exposure. Once every three years, say.

If you want to write your own 'Doctor Who' script and have it accepted, invent your own characters and situations. The only constant factors are the Doctor, his companion and the TARDIS. New writers are always in a difficult position dealing with the companions, since they change frequently. The best advice is to base the companion in your script on the one you've seen in the most recent series. Even if the companion has changed, in the meantime, this won't disqualify a good script. But don't include companions from earlier series (e.g. Peri, Tegan).

General Points about Script Writing

(The following remarks apply to any script you may write for television, not just 'Doctor Who').

There is only one way to get a reader or Script Editor on your side: write a good script. But there are many ways of creating prejudice against your work and handicapping it. If you wish to submit a professional-looking script and increase your chances of acceptance, avoid the following:-

- 1) Sloppy presentation. Being beautifully typed and presented will not save a bad script, but being badly typed and badly presented will handicap a good script. Do not send hand-written scripts (the Script Unit returns these un-read). Type your scripts neatly in the format shown on the sample page. Don't send an unreadable carbon or photocopy. Keep a copy yourself.

2) Lengthy covering letters. There is no need to write a long letter accompanying your script. You literally need only say, "Dear Sirs, Here is my script, I hope you like it". If you send us a letter which is several pages long it will just delay the reading of your script. If you have general comments to make about the programme, send them separately.

3) Elaborate scene and speech directions. Don't pack your script with directions telling the actors how their lines should be spoken or the director how to shoot a scene. If every time a character speaks you include a direction, e.g.:

THE DOCTOR: (ANXIOUS) I'm worried, Kate.

KATE: (SMILING) I'm happy, Doctor.

then you are writing a bad script. Equally, you are writing a bad script if your scene directions are full of technical instructions, e.g.:

5. INT. TARDIS CONSOLE ROOM.

(CLOSE UP OF THE DOCTOR'S FACE, WORRIED.
ZOOM IN ON THE CONTROL PANEL. PAN TO
A TWO SHOT OF MEL AND THE DOCTOR.)

CUT TO:

etc. etc.

The details of when and where we have close-ups, pans or any kind of cutting or camera movement are the responsibility of the director. They depend on how a scene is staged in terms of the actors' movements and the construction of the set they are in. You cannot know this when you write your script.

You may feel that including lots of technical detail gives your script a professional look. In fact it has quite the opposite effect. Don't do it. In particular, don't include "CUT TO:" after every scene.

If nothing else, a lot of scene and speech directions will render your script unreadable.

4) Copyright notices. Copyright notices on a script are the true mark of the amateur. The more you include, the more amateurish you will look.

- 5) Failure to include return address. We regularly receive story material with no return address included. This is frustrating both for us and the person who submitted the script, but there is nothing we can do about it. If you are sending a script, make sure that you include your name and address on the front page of the script, not just on the covering letter and certainly not just on the envelope. (Envelopes may be discarded before a letter is even read).
- 6) Unsuitable length of script. Try and make a realistic estimate of how long it would take to present your (one episode) script on the screen. An episode of 'Doctor Who' runs about 25 minutes. If your script would take much more or much less time than this, reconsider and adjust it.